DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 333 952 JC 910 347

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TITLE	Writing Across the Curriculum Programs at Community Colleges. ERIC Digest.
INSTITUTION	ERIC Clearinghouse for Junior Colleges, Los Angeles, Calif.
SPONS AGENCY	Office of Educational Research and Improvement (ED), Washington, DC.
REPORT NO	EDO-JC-90-02
PUB DATE	Sep 89
CONTRACT	RI88062002
NOTE	4p.
PUB TYPE	Information Analyses - ERIC Clearinghouse Products (071) -- Reports - Descriptive (141)
EDRS PRICE	MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS	*Classroom Techniques; *Community Colleges; Content Area Writing; Inservice Teacher Education; Literature Reviews; Program Implementation; *Teacher Participation; Teacher Role; Teacher Workshops; Teaching Methods; Two Year Colleges; *Writing Across the Curriculum; *Writing Instruction
IDENTIFIERS	ERIC Digests

ABSTRACT

Writing Across the Curriculum (WAC) programs advocate the incorporation of writing into all classes and all disciplines as a means of helping students to improve their writing skills and to use writing as a learning tool. While most instructors agree that students write poorly, the greatest obstacle to implementing WAC courses on community college campuses has been convincing faculty in non-English disciplines to incorporate writing assignments into their courses. Most successful WAC programs begin with faculty workshops to convince teachers that students learn more about a subject by writing about it than by taking true-false or multiple-choice tests, and to illustrate that instructors need not increase their paper load by giving writing assignments. At Somerset Community College (Kentucky), a 3-year training project involved all 90 faculty members in a series of 10-weekly 2-hour workshops introducing them to the value of process-oriented writing. Methods for incorporating writing assignments into already crowded syllabi include requiring students to respond to lectures in ungraded journals and having students evaluate each others' written work. A number of community colleges have expanded the WAC approach in a variety of ways. At Orange Coast College (California), the general education curriculum has been structured to pair four separate sections of freshman composition with four different content courses. At Los Medanos College (California), a single instructor teaches two or three courses to the same group of students, ensuring that writing is taught across the curriculum. Successful WAC programs must have not only administrative support, but also must assure faculty ownership of and commitment to the effort. (JMC)

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Writing Across the Curriculum Programs at Community Colleges

by Dana Nicole Williams

Writing Across the Curriculum (WAC) programs became popular at American colleges and universities during the mid-1970s in response to a perceived deficiency in students' writing and thinking abilities. WAC advocates the incorporation of writing into all classes and all disciplines, as a means of helping students to improve their writing skills and to use writing as a learning tool. Programs have been established at public and private, two- and four-year colleges and universities in all parts of the country. Some have made major changes in the nature and structure of undergraduate education, others have effected only minor changes, and still others have failed after a promising beginning (Fulwiler and Young, 1990).

Several studies have pointed to the benefits of successful WAC programs both for students and their teachers. For students, these programs strengthen critical thinking skills and writing ability, while also promoting overall literacy and active participation in learning. Hughes-Wiener and Martin's 1989 study of Minnesota community colleges found a pattern suggesting that WAC instruction may improve students' mastery of course objectives and that students with more writing experience have a more positive attitude toward writing and a better comprehension of subject material. For faculty members, the programs address such problems as disciplinary isolation and teacher burnout, while improving comradery, curricular coherence and institution-wide morale.

This digest reviews some of the recent ERIC literature on writing across the curriculum programs in two-year colleges. The digest does not reflect the growing number of documents and articles offering guidance on the development of writing assignments for particular content-area courses, but rather focuses on innovative approaches to the implementation of WAC programs on campus and WAC strategies in the classroom.

Encouraging Faculty Participation

Even though "most instructors agree that students can't write decently" (Bertch, 1985), convincing faculty in non-English disciplines to incorporate writing assignments in their courses has been the single greatest obstacle to implementing WAC courses on community college campuses. Most successful WAC programs begin with faculty workshops to convince teachers that students learn more about a subject by writing about it than by taking true-false or multiple-choice tests; to illustrate that instructors need not increase their paper load by giving writing assignments; to reassure them that they would not be required to teach grammar and technique; and to provide guidance on developing appropriate writing exercises.

According to Fulwiler and Young, successful training models have included multiweek summer seminars funded by soft money; semester- or year-long faculty seminars, with weekly or monthly meetings; and one- or two-day intensive workshops during a given term.

Somerset Community College, for example, undertook a three-year project to involve all 90 faculty members at the college in a series of 10 weekly, 2-hour workshops so that they could experience first hand the value of process-oriented writing, discover its potential for learning, and use writing for learning in their own classrooms (Adams, and others, 1985).

Jordan and Moorhead (1989) describe Eastfield College's WAC Mentor Project, which was initiated in spring 1986 with the objective of involving the entire Eastfield faculty in working toward the improvement of student writing in all subject areas. The Mentor Project pairs English instructors with instructors from other disciplines to develop writing assignments, grading techniques, and essay test components.

Classroom Techniques

Writing assignments can be incorporated into already crowded syllabi in a variety of ways, from informal journal entries to essay tests and formal research papers. Bertch (1985) suggests the following techniques:

- Guiding student notetaking through outlines and study guides;
- Requiring students to respond to lectures in un-graded journals;
- Making short writing assignments on course mater-ials to give instructors the opportunity to respond to students' writing and provide constructive feedback;

- Giving essay tests to encourage spontaneous writing and give students experience in organizing material quickly;
- Having students evaluate each others' written work.

Moss and Holder (1981) recommend the use of collaborative learning strategies to prepare students to participate in the types of team projects they will encounter in their professional lives. Students work in small groups to complete course assignments, and provide each other with feedback on oral presentations, rough drafts, and final papers.

Examples of WAC Programs

A number of community colleges have expanded the WAC approach in a variety of ways. At Pima Community College, the Community Communications Corps is a business-education partnership that promotes several communication skills (writing, speaking, reading, listening, and critical thinking) across the disciplines (Witt, 1989). The Corps recruits Business Partners in Education to work in teams with teachers from across the curriculum to impress upon students the real-world necessity for communication skills.

At Orange Coast College, the general education curriculum has been structured to pair four separate sections of Freshman Composition with four different content courses: Cultural Anthropology, Human Development, General Geology, and American History (Salzinski, 1987). Content and composition courses are scheduled back to back and the instructors work as teams to integrate course content as much as possible.

At Los Medanos College, "blocking," that is, having the same instructor teach two or three courses to the same group of students, ensures that writing is taught across the curriculum. Blcoking permits the instructor (who is now dealing with 30 students instead of 120 students) to treat students' writing problems in greater depth (Missimer, 1985).

Conclusion

Following the example of WAC efforts, programs are also being developed for reading, mathematical, and critical thinking skills across the curriculum. Successful programs must have not only administrative support, but must assure also faculty ownership of and commitment to the effort. The entire enterprise must be presented as a professional enrichment program and should be aimed at attracting the best teachers, the campus leaders, and the most effective agents of change. By doing so, the college can help ensure that the enthusiasm which is necessary to instigate an across the curriculum program continues to sustain the program over time.

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AUG 23 1991